

## The Race for *Robert*, and Other Rivalries: Negotiating the Local and (Inter)national in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans

CHARLOTTE BENTLEY

**Abstract:** *Grand opéra* occupied a prominent but fraught position in the life of New Orleans in the 1830s, where it became a focus for debates surrounding contemporary cultural and political issues. In 1835, the city's rival theatres – one francophone, the other anglophone – raced to give the first performance of Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable*, bringing tensions between their respective communities to a head. This article explores *Robert*'s arrival in New Orleans, arguing that the discourses that grew up first around this work and later *Les Huguenots* provided a means through which opposing linguistic and cultural factions within the city could negotiate their local, national and international identities.

On 4 July 1849, Giacomo Meyerbeer drafted a short letter in his daybook:

I have asked the directors of the Opéra to permit you to come on stage at the Opéra during the performance today and the one on Friday (which will be the

last of *Le Prophète*), in order to be able to examine more closely the decors, the stage machinery, etc.<sup>1</sup>

This message is a rarity in Meyerbeer's correspondence, one of barely a handful of instances in which the composer requested a 'laissez-passer' for someone at the Opéra.<sup>2</sup> The honour would allow the recipient unparalleled insight into all of the elements, human and mechanical, that brought this vast *grand opéra* to life. Any number of composers and critics would doubtless have leapt at such an opportunity, but Meyerbeer's lucky correspondent was neither of these. His name, virtually unknown today, was Pierre Davis, and he was the director of the French theatre at New Orleans.

There was nothing short of an insatiable appetite for *grand opéra* in New Orleans in the mid-nineteenth century. From 1831, audiences there welcomed performances (frequently the American premieres) of many French *grands opéras* from Europe, as well as occasional local essays in the genre.<sup>3</sup> The city's love of *grand opéra*, in fact, rivalled its popularity in many

---

<sup>1</sup> 'J'ai demandé à Messieurs les directeurs de l'Opéra que vous puissiez venir sur la scène de l'Opéra à la représentation d'aujourd'hui & à celle de Vendredi (que sera la dernière du Prophète) pour pouvoir examiner de près les décors, la machinerie etc. etc ... mercredi'. In Sabine Henze-Döhring, ed., *Giacomo Meyerbeer: Briefwechsel und Tagebücher*, 8 vols. (Berlin, 1999), 5:24.

<sup>2</sup> Sabine Henze-Döhring highlights the rarity of this event. See Henze-Döhring ed., *Giacomo Meyerbeer*, 5:754.

<sup>3</sup> Scholarly accounts focussing specifically on the performance and reception of *grand opéra* in the city are few and far between. Those that discuss the reception of the genre, albeit relatively

European capitals and lasted well into the twentieth century: by the time the New Orleans French Opera House was consumed by flames in December 1919, Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* had been performed well over 200 times in the city and was, appropriately enough, the last work heard there before the fire.<sup>4</sup>

*Grand opéra*'s position in the life of New Orleans, however, was by no means straightforward, especially in the first decade following its introduction. The genre became a focus for debates about contemporary cultural and political struggles. Moreover, the discourses that grew up around it not only altered the path along which operatic criticism in New Orleans

---

briefly, include Jack Belsom, 'Reception of Major Operatic Premieres in New Orleans during the Nineteenth Century' (MA diss., Louisiana State University, 1972) and Sarah Hibberd, 'Grand Opera in Britain and the Americas', in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge, 2003), 403-22. The most enduring of the local attempts at grand opera seems to have been Eugène Prévost's *Esmeralda*, a work in four acts and seven scenes, which was frequently performed in the 1840s. It is unclear, however, whether Prévost wrote the work in New Orleans or whether he brought it with him from France when he moved from his position at Le Havre to take up the position of *chef d'orchestre* in New Orleans in 1838. Nonetheless, the work was never part of the Parisian *grand opéra* repertoire.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Ignatius Letellier, *Meyerbeer's Les Huguenots: An Evangel of Religion and Love* (Newcastle, 2014), 122. The fire that destroyed the French Opera House was not the end of opera in New Orleans: since 1943, the New Orleans Opera Association has brought performances to the New Orleans public most summers. The scale of the enterprise and the short duration of the season, however, mean that it never rivalled the ambition of the city's earlier operatic tradition.

developed, but allowed people from various linguistic and cultural factions within the city to negotiate local, national and international identities in diverse ways. This article explores the arrival of *grand opéra* in the city, focussing in particular on the first productions of Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* and *Les Huguenots*, and teasing out concerns connected to issues of belonging: concerns that were both shaped by, and explored through, the reception of these works in the francophone and anglophone press in New Orleans.

### *Contextualising grand opera in New Orleans*

By the 1830s, New Orleans already had a well-established tradition of operatic performance. Beginning with a performance of André Grétry's *Sylvain* in May 1796, the repertoire gained a regular place on the stages of the city's earliest theatres, the Théâtre St. Philippe and the Théâtre St. Pierre.<sup>5</sup> Although popular among the French immigrant population and the growing Creole community, these early theatres struggled to stay in business.<sup>6</sup> Fires, poorly maintained

---

<sup>5</sup> For a history of opera's early years in New Orleans, see Henry Kmen, *Music in New Orleans: The Formative Years, 1791-1841* (Baton Rouge, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> The term Creole has taken on a wide variety of meanings over the years, as Carl A. Brasseaux shows in *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma: a Primer on Francophone Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 2005), 88-98. I here use the term to mean any francophone born in Louisiana rather than in Europe, irrespective of race. Over the first half of the nineteenth century, increasingly restrictive race decrees relating to the theatres in New Orleans were passed, meaning that by the mid-century the Creoles attending the Théâtre d'Orléans were predominantly white. For more information on race relations in New Orleans theatres, see Juliane Braun, 'On the Verge of

buildings, and low audience figures during the excessively hot summer months all posed challenges to the city's impresarios, and most theatres failed to last beyond a few seasons. All of this changed in 1819, when John Davis, a Paris-born impresario who had come to New Orleans as a refugee from the slave uprisings on Saint-Domingue (Haiti) at the turn of the century, opened his new Théâtre d'Orléans.<sup>7</sup> Home to the first permanent opera company in North America, it was famed both for the quality of its troupes and for the fact that they were recruited from Europe. Between the late 1820s and 1845 the company also gained national influence by introducing French-language opera to audiences in New York, Boston and other Eastern-seaboard cities, through a series of summer tours.<sup>8</sup> While the fortunes of theatres around it waxed

---

Fame: The Free People of Color and the French Theatre in Antebellum New Orleans', in *Liminale Anthropologien: Zwischenzeiten, Schwellenphänomene, Zwischenräume in Literatur und Philosophie*, ed. Jochen Achilles, Roland Borgards and Brigitte Burrichter (Würzburg, 2012), 161-82.

<sup>7</sup> The refugees from Saint-Domingue played a vital role in the city's commercial and cultural development in the early nineteenth century, as Nathalie Dessens illustrates in *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influences* (Gainesville, FL, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> For information on the tours, see Mary Grace Swift, 'The Northern Tours of the Théâtre d'Orléans, 1843 and 1845', *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 26 (1985), 155-93, and Sylvie Chevalley, 'Le Théâtre d'Orléans en tournée dans les villes du nord 1827-1833', *Comptes rendues de L'Athénée louisianais* (1955), 27-71. See also Katherine K. Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825-*

and waned, the Théâtre d'Orléans stood firm at the centre of cultural life in New Orleans and at the pinnacle of operatic endeavour in the United States. At its height in the 1840s and 1850s, the company performed five nights a week, providing a mix of *grand opéra*, *opéra-comique*, *vaudeville* and *drame*. It was only in December 1859, when the management and company abandoned it for New Orleans's opulent new French Opera House, that the Théâtre d'Orléans ceased to be the city's leading theatre.<sup>9</sup>

In its early days, the Théâtre d'Orléans's operatic repertoire consisted primarily of older *opéras comiques*, often dating back to the end of the eighteenth or first decade of the nineteenth century, with composers such as Grétry, Etienne Méhul and François-Adrien Boieldieu featuring heavily.<sup>10</sup> When Pierre Davis, John's son, took over the daily running of the theatre in the 1830s, however, he made a deliberate effort to introduce more up-to-date works and add to the repertoire on a yearly basis. He and his appointed recruiters would return from Europe each

---

60 (Urbana, 1993) for a detailed picture of touring opera troupes in America more generally during this period.

<sup>9</sup> Information about the new French Opera House and its opening can be found in John H. Baron, *Concert Life in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans: A Comprehensive Reference* (Baton Rouge, 2013), in particular 19-22. The Théâtre d'Orléans did not immediately close after the opening of the French Opera House, but struggled on in a much-depleted state until it was claimed by fire in 1866.

<sup>10</sup> Both Kmen and Belsom provide detailed information on the Théâtre d'Orléans's repertoire at various points in its history. See Kmen, *Music in New Orleans* and Belsom, 'Reception of Major Operatic Premieres'.

autumn with a new selection of operas to be presented in the most lavish style possible. In many cases, New Orleans was able to produce works very quickly after their Parisian premieres: Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*, for example, would be performed in New Orleans on 2 April 1850, just under a year after it was first heard at the Paris Opéra.

Such high-quality performances, which elevated the Théâtre d'Orléans above the level of a small provincial theatre and earned it an international reputation, would have been impossible without the networks of transatlantic connections fostered by Pierre. Indeed, Meyerbeer himself seems on occasion to have assisted Davis with recruiting a suitable prima donna for his own works, and he personally arranged for Davis to audition Anna Bertini in 1853.<sup>11</sup> Costumes, meanwhile, were often made by Jean-Louis Nonnon, 'costumier de l'Opéra'.<sup>12</sup> What is more,

---

<sup>11</sup> See Heinz Becker, ed., *Giacomo Meyerbeer: Briefwechsel und Tagebücher* (Berlin, 2002), 6: 697. There are a number of other instances when Meyerbeer met with and assisted Pierre Davis, as can be seen in volumes 4-6 of the *Tagebücher* and also in Robert Ignatius Letellier ed., *The Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer* (London, 1999-2004), volumes 2 and 3. Bertini played the role of Marguerite d'Anjou in the New Orleans premiere of Meyerbeer's opera of that name in April 1854, among various other roles. It seems that the audition organised by Meyerbeer in 1853 was a re-audition, as Bertini had already sung with the New Orleans troupe, performing the role of Berthe in the Théâtre d'Orléans premiere of *Le Prophète* in 1850.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Bernadet to Nonnon, 1 April 1842, Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NLAS-392, which consists of a letter concerning a costume transaction sent from a singer at the Théâtre d'Orléans to Nonnon in Paris. Jean-Louis Nonnon (1786-1852) was first employed at the Opéra as an assistant in the costume department on 1

Davis was assisted artistically by the scene painter Louis Develle, who settled in New Orleans in 1829 after training in Paris under none other than Pierre-Luc-Charles Ciceri, renowned stage designer of the Opéra.<sup>13</sup> And the leader of the New Orleans orchestra was Eugène-Prosper Prévost, a Prix de Rome winner who moved to Louisiana in the late 1830s.<sup>14</sup> Davis and his

---

August 1828. He was promoted to the role of ‘maître tailleur’ on 1 July 1829, and remained in that position until his death in 1852. His wife and daughter also worked in the costume department of the Opéra. See Jean-Louis Tamvaco, ed., *Les Cancans de l’Opéra: Chroniques de l’Académie royale de musique et du théâtre à Paris sous les deux Restaurations* (Paris, 2000), 1:129.

<sup>13</sup> Develle was born in Paris in 1799. After his studies with Ciceri, he decorated Rheims Cathedral for the consecration of Charles X in 1825, later taking up an appointment as a set designer at Le Havre. He arrived in New Orleans in 1829 and remained there until his death in 1868. For more biographical detail, see Patricia Brady, John Mahé and Rosanne McCaffrey, ed., *Encyclopaedia of New Orleans Artists, 1718-1918* (New Orleans, 1987). Only a small part of Develle’s oeuvre is publically available today. One set design and some non-theatrical sketches are held at the Historic New Orleans Collection, along with his painting of ‘The French Market and Red Store’ (1841). The Louisiana State Museums have another Develle painting featuring a similar scene. Drawings by him can be found in the local press.

<sup>14</sup> For a brief biography of Prévost, see Baron, *Concert Life*, 179-83.



performers therefore forged links that allowed for the recreation of grand opera on a near-Parisian scale.<sup>15</sup>

It was the arrival of the second grand opera in New Orleans that was the clearest initial demonstration of this. Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* opened at the Théâtre d'Orléans in 1835 and the performance has since passed into the limited mythology surrounding opera in the city: Henry Kmen, Sarah Hibberd, and Catherine Jones have all discussed it to varying degrees.<sup>16</sup> The importance of the production has to be understood in terms of theatrical rivalries. In 1824 a challenge to the Théâtre d'Orléans's dominance emerged in the form of James Caldwell's anglophone American Theatre on Camp Street; in the weeks before the French theatre's production of *Robert*, the city's francophone residents were apparently horrified to discover that

---

<sup>15</sup> Sadly, we must settle for the word of reviewers and the occasional comments of other theatre-goers in their personal letters and diaries as proof of the opulence and high quality of these productions: most of the physical materials that would allow us to piece together an impression of the visual spectacle have been lost, and we are left only to imagine what they would have looked like.

<sup>16</sup> Kmen, *Music in New Orleans*, 133-7; Hibberd, 'Grand Opera in Britain and the Americas', 417; Catherine Jones, *Literature and Music in the Atlantic World, 1767-1867* (Edinburgh, 2014), 89-90. Jennifer C. H. J. Wilson discusses the reception of the Théâtre d'Orléans's production of *Robert le diable* in New York as part of their 1845 summer tour in 'Meyerbeer and the New Orleans French Opera Company in New York City, 1845: «How, therefore, Could New York Have Remained behind? »', in *Meyerbeer and Grand opéra from the July Monarchy to the Present*, ed. Mark Everist (Turnhout, 2016), 361-82.

the Anglo-Americans had beaten them to the premiere of a French opera. *Robert* premiered in English at the Camp Street Theatre on 30 March 1835, finally reaching the stage of the Théâtre d'Orléans six weeks later, on 12 May. The French, so most accounts conclude, were shaken by this challenge posed by the Americans to their cultural supremacy, but took comfort that the Théâtre d'Orléans's production was of a higher quality.

With only the critics' words from which to piece together the details of these productions, it is, of course, problematic to draw such definite judgements. Their assessments, however, do allow us to reconstruct something of the unique details of these performances. Both maintained Meyerbeer's five-act structure, but were said to have edited the musical content differently.<sup>17</sup> The scenery was frequently discussed: the American Theatre's had been made specially for the occasion by a Mr. Smith of Philadelphia, while the French theatre seems to have made use of some existing scenery, supplemented by a few impressive new additions by Develle.<sup>18</sup> Overall, the French theatre's *mise-en-scène* seems to have been more extensive, leading reviewers to complain about the long breaks between acts as the scenery was reset.<sup>19</sup> With regard to *divertissements*, the French theatre had 'a greater supernumerary corps of ladies for nuns', even if those nuns turned out to be neither skilled ballerinas nor the slender beauties for whom the reviewers had hoped.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, on at least one occasion the American Theatre's *Robert* was

---

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, *The Bee* (14 May 1835).

<sup>18</sup> *The Bee* (2 April 1835) and *L'Abeille* (11 May 1835).

<sup>19</sup> See *The Bee* (13 and 16 May 1835).

<sup>20</sup> 'The ladies who represented the nuns in one scene, and attendants on the princess in the next, excited our risible faculties – particularly in their skipping intended for a dance, when they

billed alongside a minstrel show performed by ‘Daddy’ Rice.<sup>21</sup> The productions, therefore, must have sounded and looked quite different.

The popularity of this tale about the race for *Robert*, of course, has much to do with the way in which it seems to exemplify the deep tensions in this period between the city’s francophone and anglophone populations, tensions that were raw in both the cultural and the commercial sphere. Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, New Orleans had seen ever increasing numbers of anglophone settlers from the northern states move to the city; the 1830s saw a particular influx of these Anglo-Americans, whose arrival irreversibly altered the social and cultural make-up of the city, thus initiating the process of its integration and assimilation into the ever-growing United States.<sup>22</sup> This was a period in which the future of francophone citizens and their leading roles in commerce and government suddenly became much less certain, and French linguistic and cultural hegemony in the city was significantly challenged. The very idea of what it meant to be ‘French’ in New Orleans was called into question.

---

showed they did not stand upon trifles [sic.] or slender props’, complained the reviewer for *The Bee* (14 May 1835).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *The Bee* (3 April 1835).

<sup>22</sup> For more on the city’s demographic changes during this period, see Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., ‘Creoles and Americans’, in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge, 1992), 153-60. See also Carl A. Brasseaux, *The ‘Foreign French’: Nineteenth-Century French Immigration into Louisiana, Vol. 1, 1820-1839* (Lafayette, 1990), xi.

Such fundamental tensions doubtless shaped the race to produce *Robert*, but their considerable impact on the direction of operatic criticism, in particular, has never been explored. A closer examination of the productions and their reviews, then, allows us to understand some of the intricate ways in which the *Robert le diable* incident allowed critics to explore new avenues of operatic meaning, shaping the future of grand opera criticism in New Orleans. In turn, such an examination enables us to delve into the nuances of cultural relations in New Orleans at the time.

*From La Muette to Robert le diable: Developments in Operatic Criticism*

Before going any further, we need to return briefly to the initial introduction of *grand opéra* to New Orleans: the production of Daniel Auber's *La Muette de Portici* at the French theatre on 29 April 1831. In light of the astonishing efforts that Davis and his team made, it might seem surprising that the genre's first appearance in the city drew little attention in the critical press. At the time, the city had two major newspapers, both bilingual: each had French- and English-language sections, and the names of each newspaper were also in both French and English (*Le Courier de la Louisiane/The Louisiana Courier*; *L'Abeille/The Bee*).<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> In the very early years of the nineteenth century, the English-language sections of these newspapers were often direct translations of the French sections; by the 1830s, however, they contained different material to suit the interests of the city's divided linguistic communities.

When it came to *La Mulette*, the city's longest-standing newspaper, the bilingual *Courrier de la Louisiane* / *The Louisiana Courier*, did not even review the performance.<sup>24</sup> The other major bilingual newspaper at the time, *L'Abeille* / *The Bee*, stretched to two short reviews, one of which simply assessed the performance of the singers who, at this late stage in the theatrical season (it had started in mid-November 1830), were already very familiar to audiences.<sup>25</sup> The other review consisted almost exclusively of superficial remarks about the 'large musical conception', and referred vaguely to the 'theatrical pomp and the décor', before concluding positively that '*La Mulette* is one of the spectacles that one must see'.<sup>26</sup>

While such a response might seem out of keeping with the overheated critical excitement to be generated later over grand opera, it was not necessarily out of keeping with the state of operatic criticism in New Orleans in the early 1830s. The city's newspapers were the principal sites for the printing of operatic and musical criticism in this period, but most often this amounted to no more than notices about which works were to be performed; theatrical gossip,

---

<sup>24</sup> For more on the history of New Orleans's newspapers in this period, see Samuel J. Marino, 'Early French-Language Newspapers in New Orleans', *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 7 (1966), 309-21.

<sup>25</sup> See *L'Abeille* (3 and 21 May 1831). After Davis's early attempts to keep the theatre open all year failed due to a huge drop in audience figures during the extremely hot and disease-ridden summer months, the Théâtre d'Orléans ran its season from November to June.

<sup>26</sup> 'Cette grande conception musicale...'; 'L'un des mérites de cette pièce est dans la pompe théâtrale et le décor', 'En somme, la *Mulette de Portici* est l'un de ces spectacles qu'il faut voir', *L'Abeille* (3 May 1831).

and assessments of the troupe's European performers. Scattered among this running commentary were frequent reminders to the people of New Orleans that they were very lucky to have a theatre of such quality in their city.<sup>27</sup> Newspapers, though there were many of them, suffered from the same degree of impermanence as the city's early theatres. Many lasted only a few months before either the enterprise ran out of funds or the editor (and these papers were most often founded either by a sole editor or at most a pair) lost interest in the endeavour and moved on to other things.<sup>28</sup> In 1831, no newspaper seems to have employed a permanent or specialist music critic for either its French- or English-language sections, so they depended either upon the knowledge of the editor or upon articles submitted by readers for their theatrical news and reviews.<sup>29</sup>

The lack of professional music critics, combined with the dominance of the Théâtre d'Orléans and its familiar repertoire in New Orleans's cultural life, meant that for much of the 1820s there was little incentive for francophone reviewers to expand their critical vocabulary.

---

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, *L'Ami des Lois* (31 May and 7 June 1823).

<sup>28</sup> For more on the emergence and disappearance of newspapers during this period, see Edward Larocque Tinker, *Bibliography of the French Newspapers and Periodicals of Louisiana* (Worcester, MA, 1933).

<sup>29</sup> The *Louisiana Gazette* (1804-1826), however, while it did not employ a full-time music critic, did employ a regular feuilletonist, Alexis Daudet, from 1819 until 1825; he happened to be closely connected with the French theatre. Daudet initially wrote his column on local poetry and arts, but by the end of his term had simply begun to reprint articles from Parisian newspapers. See Marino, 'Early French-Language Newspapers in New Orleans', 316-20.

The American Theatre's repertoire of abridged Shakespeare and light comic works, interspersed by musical performances from an orchestra that was by all accounts incomplete and of poor quality, did not inspire any increased critical fervour or rigour among the francophone reviewers. Instead, they continued to remind New Orleans's French and Creole citizens to support the French theatre, stressing that they were fortunate to have such a high-quality theatre and such a dedicated director as John Davis.<sup>30</sup> The English-language sections of the papers, meanwhile, now had their own performers and theatrical gossip to discuss, and therefore paid even less attention to the activities of the French theatre than before. It is nonetheless the case, however, that the opening of Caldwell's anglophone American Theatre in the mid-1820s ultimately had an untold impact on musical criticism and indeed on the success of *grand opéra* in the city.

Consider the critical reactions to the dual *Robert le diable* productions in 1835. The combined performances generated far more critical attention than any previous theatrical premieres in the city. Between the English- and French-language sections of *L'Abeille* and the *Courrier de la Louisiane*, one can count some twenty-one articles, many of which were lengthy. Only six of these appeared in the French-language sections of the papers: the rest were in English. The number of related articles is remarkable, but so too is the fact that some of the English-language articles discussed the Théâtre d'Orléans's production and vice versa. Furthermore, the large number of English-language reviews calls into question an impression conveyed in many of the scholarly accounts of the race that the French, intent on decrying the American performance of *Robert* and promoting their own production, generated much of the interest surrounding the affair. Even Kmen's examination of the reception of the opera, the most

---

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, the article on this subject published in *L'Argus* (7 January 1826).

detailed to date, draws almost entirely on the two reviews written by the French critic for the *Courrier*, making only passing mention of *L'Abeille*'s French- and English-language reviews.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, no scholar to my knowledge has paid significant attention to the English-language reception of *Robert* in New Orleans. Yet it is these English reviews, not the French ones, that reveal to us the way critics used the work to help them make the first tentative movements away from the old school of dramatic criticism.

Significantly, in the English-language reviews we can see the beginnings of what appears to be a work-centred, rather than a largely performer-centred, opera criticism.<sup>32</sup> Particularly significant in this respect is a pair of articles published in *L'Abeille* in advance of the work's first performance at the American Theatre.<sup>33</sup> These were not simply notices advertising or puffing the upcoming performance, but lengthy articles designed to introduce the reader to the opera and the historical events that formed the background to the story. The first to appear, on 27 March 1835, did not discuss the opera itself (although it promised it would be treated in a separate article very soon), but instead gave a detailed account of the historical figure of Robert, Duke of Normandy. The second article, from the next day, sketched out the opera's plot, and included quotations from the libretto of key choruses. In showing a concern for understanding the operatic text, rather than the way in which it was performed, these articles mark a departure from the familiar

---

<sup>31</sup> Kmen, *Music in New Orleans*, 133-7.

<sup>32</sup> For an exploration of a similar shift in the periodical press of Milan at the beginning of the century, see Emanuele Senici, 'Delirious Hopes: Napoleonic Milan and the Rise of Modern Italian Operatic Criticism', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 27 (2015), 97-127.

<sup>33</sup> *The Bee* (27 March 1835 and 28 March 1835).



patterns of contemporary theatrical reporting in New Orleans. Their appearance in *L'Abeille* is particularly conspicuous in that they were printed on the front page, surrounded not by other articles on historic or artistic events but reports on local legislative news and bills passed by the Louisiana Senate. These were, in other words, deemed worthy of a place alongside the city's 'official' news.

There are two distinct avenues to explore when considering how the English-language critics in New Orleans might have arrived at this new approach to *Robert*. The first relates to a set of distinctively local issues, as the English-language section of *L'Abeille* had for several years been railing against the practice of 'puffing' visiting star singers at the city's American Theatre, complaining that the 'ov[er] rehearsed [sic.] eulogies' or outright scorn afforded to such performers was childish.<sup>34</sup> They called instead for a new style of theatrical criticism that was 'unbought and impartial', and we can perhaps read their approach to *Robert* as an outgrowth of this debate: here was a work never before performed in the city which they could explore in ways distinct from their usual focus on performers, and which allowed them to demonstrate what their new approach could achieve.<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that the English-language critics drew a dichotomy between 'event-based' and 'work-based' composition (to use the somewhat loaded terms Carl Dahlhaus employed to describe audience mind-set in the nineteenth century), but more simply that they saw this as an opportunity to connect the performance with the thing being

---

<sup>34</sup> *The Bee* (21 May 1831).

<sup>35</sup> *The Bee* (21 May 1831).

performed.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, they felt that *Robert* could pave the way to a greater appreciation of music in the city, and went on to remark that the event was a reminder that there were ‘excellent opportunit[ies] for the organisation of Philharmonic societies’ in New Orleans.<sup>37</sup> Fundamentally, however, their approach avoided the two extremes of flattery and evisceration characteristic of reviews focused on star singers.

Beyond this, it is very likely that the critics’ newly angled concern for *Robert* was influenced by a set of debates about adapting the opera that had emerged in London when the work was first performed there in 1831-32.<sup>38</sup> The circumstances surrounding these early productions of *Robert* in London provoked vocal outrage from Meyerbeer, lengthy copyright proceedings, and discussions in the press about fidelity when adapting works, as Christina Fuhrmann has shown.<sup>39</sup> While there is no concrete indication in the New Orleans reviews that critics had definitely read about the situation in London, their assessments of *Robert* suggest that the possibility was highly likely. Indeed, the English-language critics explored at length the version in which *Robert* reached New Orleans. The critic for the *Courrier*, for example, proudly

---

<sup>36</sup> See Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley, 1989), in particular 8-15.

<sup>37</sup> *The Bee* (15 May 1835).

<sup>38</sup> Regular examples of operatic criticism from London and Paris would have been available to both francophone and anglophone critics in New Orleans during the 1830s: reviews and theatrical articles from the foreign press were often reprinted in New Orleans’s own newspapers.

<sup>39</sup> Christina Fuhrmann, *Foreign Opera at the London Playhouses: From Mozart to Bellini* (Cambridge, 2015), 146-69.

explained that Thomas Reynoldson, the Englishman who directed the production, had been able to procure a copy ‘of the original score as produced at Paris’, not directly from Europe, but on loan from Pierce Butler of Philadelphia.<sup>40</sup> The statement, then, validated the American Theatre’s production as ‘authentic’ by signalling its connection with Meyerbeer’s original. Such ‘authenticity’ could by no means be taken for granted in New Orleans at this time: the American Theatre frequently performed completely rearranged versions of popular works, including Shakespeare’s plays and Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*. Works could even change genre in their transition to the New Orleans stage, with operas becoming melodramas or vaudeville-type variety entertainments. By stressing the faithfulness of this production of *Robert* to the original, therefore, the English-language critics aimed to elevate it far above the level of the theatre’s usual offerings.

The reviewers claimed with particular pride that Reynoldson had not even rearranged Meyerbeer’s score, as he had done when he produced a melodrama version of the work in New York,<sup>41</sup> but had ‘merely curtailed the parts of those instruments which he has not under command in his own orchestra’.<sup>42</sup> In their eyes, then, this might have been Meyerbeer with holes, but it really was Meyerbeer. Such ‘authenticity’, of course, was very much a relative concept and for a multitude of reasons, among them that a minstrel show was on occasion paired with the

---

<sup>40</sup> ‘For the *Courrier*: Opera of *Robert le diable*’, *The Louisiana Courier* (30 March 1835). Butler was the husband of British actress and diarist Fanny Kemble.

<sup>41</sup> For a brief insight into Reynoldson’s adaptation of the score for the melodrama version in New York in 1834, see Wilson, ‘Meyerbeer and the New Orleans French Opera Company’, 366-7.

<sup>42</sup> ‘For the *Courrier*: Opera of *Robert le diable*’, *The Louisiana Courier* (30 March 1835).

opera at the American Theatre, but the fact remains that these reviewers made Meyerbeer's wishes much more prominent in the reception of *Robert* than those of any composer before him.

The critics' discussions of fidelity, however, were perhaps less concerned with Meyerbeer as a composer and more with the geographical associations they made between him and the French capital. Indeed, the writer for the *Courrier* stated that when *Robert* was 'acted at the patent theatres of London, only the melody performed was original', but took pains to point out that at the American Theatre in New Orleans, 'the original music [was]... for the first time presented outside of Paris'.<sup>43</sup> In such a light, questions of authenticity extended beyond the composer and his score, revealing aspirations to the artistic status of Europe's great metropolitan cultural centres. Indeed, the reviewers pointed out that Reynoldson was well qualified to direct the American Theatre's production because he had 'seen the work performed in Paris under the inspection of the composer' and had later performed in the opera himself at London's Covent Garden and King's Theatres.<sup>44</sup> He could therefore be relied upon to produce the work in New Orleans with faithfulness to the versions enjoyed in these cultural capitals.

The reviewers' phrasing suggests yet another nuance to their positioning of the American Theatre and reveals their belief in an international hierarchy of cultural centres. That is to say, in their above formulation, fidelity to the Parisian production ranked above fidelity to the London ones, even though the American Theatre's performance, like those in London, was in English.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> 'For the *Courrier*: Opera of *Robert le diable*', *The Louisiana Courier* (30 March 1835).

<sup>44</sup> '*Robert le diable*', *The Bee* (1 April 1835) and 'For the *Courrier*: Opera of *Robert le diable*', *The Louisiana Courier* (30 March 1835).

<sup>45</sup> See *The Bee* (3 April 1835) and *The Louisiana Courier* (30 March 1835).

In general, London was the English-language reviewers' touchstone for theatrical excellence, and to compare a production with London was usually considered exceptional praise indeed. Here, though, the reviewer proudly notes that the American Theatre had surpassed London in that all-important question of authenticity. Reynoldson, who was reported to have personally overseen every aspect of the production (not only was he translator, director and editor, but he 'taught the vocal corps and superintended the instrumental', as well as performing the role of Bertram), seems to have verged on cultural hubris: while Meyerbeer was known for meticulously presiding over the European productions of his own works, Reynoldson's fastidious attention to detail at the American Theatre almost 'out-Meyerbeered' the composer himself.<sup>46</sup> For the anglophone reviewers, the American Theatre's production was comparable only with Paris.

In drawing such a link, the review's significance was twofold: on the one hand, the critic posed a challenge to the local francophone community who had longstanding cultural ties to Paris. On the other, the review indicates that Anglo-Americans felt at home enough in New Orleans to imagine the city's international position as their own, even if the way in which they were able to do that was through *grand opéra*: a borrowing from French culture. Importantly, however, it was a piece of French culture newly arrived from France, rather than something well established among New Orleans's French and Creole communities. A battle over established cultural territory would have marked a purely local struggle, but the adoption of *Robert* (which was new to both the majority of the city's francophone population and its Anglo-Americans) as the contested point reveals that the Anglo-Americans were becoming established enough in New Orleans to project their international ambitions through the city's name. In the discourse

---

<sup>46</sup> See *The Bee* (1 April 1835).

surrounding *Robert, grand opéra* became the representative of Anglo-American dreams of cosmopolitanism.

In the same moment, the francophone citizens seem to have lapsed into silence in the face of increasing challenges to their sense of national identity posed both from within and without. Of course, the American Theatre's production predictably rankled the French-language critics, resulting in an excoriating review in the *Courrier*.<sup>47</sup> But when it came to the French theatre's production, the same critics had little to say,<sup>48</sup> with their comments tending towards non-specific praise, such as 'never has theatrical pomp been pushed to such a degree at this theatre'.<sup>49</sup> Nowhere did they attempt a comparison with the American Theatre's performance.<sup>50</sup> Instead,

---

<sup>47</sup> 'Théâtre de la Rue du Camp: *Robert-le-diable*', *Le Courrier de la Louisiane* (1 April 1835). So venomous were his comments that even the critic for *L'Abeille* felt compelled to defend the American Theatre, saying that it had 'made very great progress': 'Le théâtre de la Rue du Camp, on ne peut le nier, a fait de très-grand progrès.' *L'Abeille* (3 April 1835).

<sup>48</sup> The *Courrier* printed one review and a biographical article about Meyerbeer copied from the Parisian press, while *L'Abeille* managed just a single review. See 'Théâtre d'Orléans: *Robert le diable*', *Le Courrier de la Louisiane* (14 May 1835); 'Théâtre d'Orléans: *Robert le diable* (2)', *Le Courrier de la Louisiane* (18 May 1835), and 'Théâtre d'Orléans', *L'Abeille* (14 May 1835).

<sup>49</sup> 'Jamais pompe théâtrale n'avait été poussée à un aussi haut degré à ce théâtre'. 'Théâtre d'Orléans: *Robert le diable*', *Le Courrier de la Louisiane* (14 May 1835).

<sup>50</sup> The English-language critics, however, were quick to point out that the French theatre's production, though good, had not been quite as luxurious or polished as they had expected. That they had the confidence in their own theatre's production to feel justified in criticising the French

they focused on growing internal divisions within the francophone community: plans were afoot for a new French theatre in the city.<sup>51</sup> While these plans never came to fruition, their subtext was clear: the Théâtre d'Orléans was not doing enough to promote young and, more importantly, local artists, instead focussing on recreating Parisian works.<sup>52</sup> A split was beginning to emerge between populations who located their francophone identity back in France and those who located it in the Creole milieu of Louisiana. In a moment of such cultural confusion, the French theatre's production of *Robert* seems, perhaps conveniently, to have slipped from the forefront of francophone critical attention.

### *Les Huguenots*

---

theatre's is particularly remarkable, given that in the months preceding the *Robert* affair the same critics had advised audiences to go to the French theatre's production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* rather than the American Theatre's heavily rearranged version, since there they would 'see and hear it properly done'. *The Bee* (5 March 1835).

<sup>51</sup> A call for subscribers for this new theatre appeared in *L'Abeille* (2 April 1835).

<sup>52</sup> The authors claimed that the francophone citizens of New Orleans had a need for such a Théâtre Louisianais to help young artists foster their genius and to ensure that they were given the place they deserved in history. *L'Abeille* (2 April 1835). John Davis felt compelled to respond to this challenge, publishing an article in which he stated that the city would not be able to sustain two French theatres and pleaded with the francophone citizens to devote their patronage to his theatre. See *L'Abeille* (17 April 1835) and *Le Courrier de la Louisian* (18 April 1835).

If the English-language reviews of *Robert* had driven the early critical fervour for grand opera in New Orleans, by the time *Les Huguenots* received its first performance at the Théâtre d'Orléans on 30 April 1839, the situation was very different. French/Creole and Anglo-American tensions had developed in the four years since the race to stage *Robert*, and had been formalised in 1836 through the division of New Orleans into three distinct and semi-autonomous municipalities, each with its own council, taxes, schools and other services.<sup>53</sup> The municipalities were divided not only along linguistic but also racial lines. The First Municipality, covering the French Quarter and oldest parts of the city, was home predominantly to the white Creoles and French immigrants, while the city's Anglo-American population occupied the Second Municipality to the south. The Third Municipality was home to the free black population. While this is, of course, an over-simplification of New Orleans's demographics in this period (for instance, it entirely obscures the ever-growing German and Irish populations, among others), it is a useful illustration of the way in which large-scale social, economic and cultural divisions between the different sections of society were solidifying.

The city's theatrical scene had also undergone some important changes. The American Theatre, located in the Second Municipality, had not continued its direct challenge to the Théâtre d'Orléans after *Robert*, but had returned to its usual repertoire of spoken drama and less ambitious musical works. A new English-language theatre, however, the St. Charles, had opened in the Second Municipality in 1836, again under the management of Caldwell, and each summer

---

<sup>53</sup> For more on the municipalities and Creole/Anglo-American tensions at this time, see Virginia R. Domínguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (London, 1997), 110-32.



played host to a visiting Italian opera company from Havana.<sup>54</sup> Their performances introduced audiences in the city to Italian opera in its original language and vastly expanded the repertoire known to the New Orleans theatre-going public. Up to this point, Italian repertoire in the city had been limited to a handful of works by Mozart and Rossini, performed either in French translation or arranged and translated for the English theatres.<sup>55</sup> The Théâtre d'Orléans's position in the life of the city as a whole was now even less certain: as the formation of the municipalities created more concrete cultural divisions in certain respects, the appeal of internationally reputed Italian operas lured French/Creole theatre-goers across municipal boundaries to the St. Charles.

*Les Huguenots* nonetheless received a lot of critical attention and drew full houses throughout the remainder of the 1838-9 season. Although *Robert le diable* had also generated excitement, the situation this time was different. While the English-language critics had felt the need to build up to the first performance of *Robert* with information about its plot, libretto and historical context, *Les Huguenots* clearly needed no introduction. The opera and its composer had entered the public consciousness of both francophone and anglophone residents well before its first performance in the city. Indeed, in December 1838, the recently founded English-

---

<sup>54</sup> For more on the history of the St. Charles, see Lucile Gafford, 'A History of the St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans, 1835-43' (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1932).

<sup>55</sup> Information on theatrical repertoires in the city in the first half of the century can be found in Kmen, *Music in New Orleans*. For a full list of all opera performances in New Orleans between 1796 and 1841, see Kmen, 'Singing and Dancing in New Orleans: a Social History of the Birth and Growth of Balls and Opera, 1791-1841' (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1961), Table III, 275-449.

language paper, *The Daily Picayune*, printed a fictional vignette entitled ‘Fireside Talk – No. IX’. The story features a family who are gathered in their sitting room one evening. The daughter plays a piece at the piano, about which she says the following:

[It] floated in my brain for months – I heard it in my sleep – it was with me all day, like a divine presence. – I tried to sing it, to touch the notes on the piano, but the moment I made an audible attempt, the fairy creation left me like a startled fawn. I was obliged to relinquish all attempts to embody it, and until this day, it has slept in my heart and memory, like a sacred trust. Tonight I find it among the collection of music sent me from Paris. It is from ‘Les Huguenots’ – I prize it as I would a manuscript from Pompeii.<sup>56</sup>

Her mother, the author goes on to recount, kept ‘silence for a minute’ following the performance, eventually breaking the reverie to point out that the opera would be performed ‘in fine style’ at the French theatre some months hence, and that they would soon have the ‘opportunity of luxuriating amid the beauties of the entire opera’.<sup>57</sup>

Here, then, we have an indication of the way in which grand opera had entered the popular imagination in New Orleans by 1839.<sup>58</sup> While the family still looked forward to being

---

<sup>56</sup> ‘Fireside Talk – No. IX’, *The Daily Picayune* (9 December 1838).

<sup>57</sup> ‘Fireside Talk – No. IX’, *The Daily Picayune* (9 December 1838).

<sup>58</sup> Cormac Newark’s *Opera in the Novel from Balzac to Proust* (Cambridge, 2011) provides a particularly suggestive model to read this example and the ways in which its anonymous author

able to see the opera at the theatre, ‘the work’ had achieved an identity outside of its onstage form. For the girl to prize the score (presumably either reduced for piano or even arranged as drawing-room *morceaux*) as an object, and to describe the musical experience in such poetic terms, opens up a very different aesthetic avenue for the reception of grand opera from any seen before in the city. Her description takes on an intensely Romantic quality, as she recalls the interiority of a musical experience for which she has heretofore been unable to find an external outlet. Since French opera in New Orleans had, in journalistic sources, at least, almost always been discussed in terms of a theatre-centred experience until this point (discussions of *Robert*’s plot and historical context can be understood to have been intended to enhance the reader’s impending visit to the theatre), such an interiorised approach was very new.

The focus here on subjective experience rather than the details of a particular performance reflects, I suggest, a reconfiguration of the ways in which grand opera was being imagined spatially and with regards to nationality among New Orleans’s anglophone reviewers. In fact, it reflects a paradox of national identity within the city more generally during this period: while the city’s racial and linguistic divisions solidified in physical form through the separate municipalities, culturally speaking, the lines became blurred in many ways. The family in this story seems to be of French descent: the father is called Adolphe, while his wife is described simply as ‘La Madame’. At a first glance, then, this simply raises the question of why the *Daily Picayune*, an English-language newspaper, would print a story of Creole life. Was this some kind of nostalgic evocation of the French diaspora?

---

constructs a literary sphere of operatic experience. Space does not permit me to explore these possibilities here.

But the matter grows in complexity: the couple's children, both young adults, do not have French names: one is called Magnus, the other Boleyna, and, unlike their parents, they do not litter their speech with French phrases. In fact, on the one occasion that Magnus uses a French word, he immediately follows it with 'as mother calls it', thus distancing himself from the French language of his parents. Furthermore, Boleyna's score might have come to her from Paris, but she tells her father that she first heard the music of *Les Huguenots* on the family's visit to Hoboken, the New Jersey port town, the previous summer. Far from this being a story of a Creole family clinging desperately to the culture of the 'old country', then, this is grand opera representing movement and culture across national boundaries. A sense of timelessness and spacelessness is evoked by her valorising the score through a comparison to the classical world, by way of Pompeii. In this light, the paper's evocation of this apparently Creole family perhaps has more to do with their status as cultural aristocracy within New Orleans than to do with any specific questions of nationality. The anglophone critics presented grand opera as crossing national and linguistic boundaries, but positioned it within an elite cultural sphere.<sup>59</sup>

When it came to talking about the Théâtre d'Orléans's production, the anglophone section of *L'Abeille* printed an anticipatory article on the day of its premiere, in which the author talked of the cost of ensuring that this was the most lavish production possible (the cost, he

---

<sup>59</sup> For an account of the formation of distinct elite and popular artistic spheres in America later in the nineteenth century, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1988) and Joseph A. Mussulman, *Music in the Cultured Generation: A Social History of Music in America, 1870-1900* (Evanston, IL, 1971).

claimed, amounted to ‘upwards of \$12,000’, a phenomenal sum for the time).<sup>60</sup> Describing the success that the opera had achieved in Paris, the author declared that he expected it to achieve similar success in New Orleans. And with that, the English-language press said no more about the work, besides printing adverts for performances. Such a dearth of English-language critical reporting perhaps affirms not a lack of interest in grand opera on the part of the Anglo-Americans, but rather the elite cultural status the English-language press fashioned for the genre: wealthy Anglo-American families in the city made sure that they and their children spoke French as well as English, marking them out as part of the highest class of society (perhaps by virtue of the fact it was the language of Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, or perhaps because it was increasingly becoming a minority language in New Orleans). Thus they were able to read French-language theatrical reports anyway. They positioned grand opera above the arena of local tensions, on a cultural plane accessible only to supranational elites.

The French-language press, on the other hand, perhaps mindful of its lack of interest in *Robert* four years earlier, published numerous articles about *Les Huguenots*. *L’Abeille*, for example, included several full reviews of the opera, along with related correspondence from readers. Also in contrast with the reception of *Robert*, this news was not (for the most part) squashed between legal and commercial reports. Instead, particularly lengthy reviews were sometimes set apart in a dedicated feuilleton.<sup>61</sup> This partly reflects the perceived importance of *Les Huguenots*, but is also reflective of the fact that *L’Abeille* had, in 1839, employed a dedicated music critic for the first time, and was keen to advertise that fact through the creation

---

<sup>60</sup> ‘*Les Huguenots*’, *The Bee* (30 April 1839).

<sup>61</sup> See for example, ‘Feuilleton. Théâtre: *Les Huguenots*’, *L’Abeille* (7 May 1839).

of a feuilleton, which presented separate operatic reviews.<sup>62</sup> All of this provided the francophone reviewers space to influence how the genre articulated local, national and international identity.

They did not always do this in ways that would appear most obvious to a modern reader, however. There were numerous resonances between the dramas which unfolded at the theatres in this moment and the situation the French found themselves in. Most obviously, the fact that the plot of *Les Huguenots* revolves around a struggle between opposing Catholic and Protestant factions might have provided critics with ample points for comparison with the current local situation, even if the Catholic francophone community saw themselves as the oppressed rather than the oppressors. What is more, in the same week as the *Les Huguenots* premiere, the Théâtre d'Orléans also premiered a local spoken drama by the playwright Auguste Lussan called *Les Martyrs de la Louisiane* about the attempts of the eighteenth-century French citizens of New Orleans to resist occupation (albeit, in this instance, occupation by the Spanish).<sup>63</sup>

To be sure, reviews of *Les Martyrs* included references to 'the mother country' and appealed to the francophone residents' feelings of resentment towards another culture's intrusion into their own. The critics did not, however, draw explicit connections between the francophone population and the Catholics in *Les Huguenots*: not a single review even analysed the plot of the opera.<sup>64</sup> Instead, discussions of the 'local' took place through examination of the performers and

---

<sup>62</sup> Baron, *Concert Life*, 303.

<sup>63</sup> For an analysis of this work, see Juliane Braun, 'Petit Paris en Amérique? French Theatrical Culture in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana' (PhD diss., Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, 2013), 87-97.

<sup>64</sup> See *L'Abeille* (4 and 7 May 1839), for example.

the work's scenery and spectacle, focussing in particular on the work of the scene painter, Develle. That Develle's contribution to the production was perceived as being extremely important was evident even before the opera's first performance. In fact, adverts for the work in the press gave little indication of its musical contents, but listed the locations in which the acts were set, having informed the readers that all of the scenes had been painted by Develle specifically for the occasion.<sup>65</sup>

Develle's work was so integral to the impression of the whole that in one performance he was called onto the stage during the second act of the opera to take multiple bows, as the audience was overawed with his backdrop depicting the garden at the Château de Chenonceau.<sup>66</sup> An article in *L'Abeille* even claimed that Develle's backdrops for the work were veritable *chefs d'œuvre* and reminded the people of New Orleans just how fortunate they were to have such a master among them.<sup>67</sup> Not only had the theatre imported large amounts of key material, but it also had the resources locally to implement and indeed add to them. The city's francophone press was proud of this achievement: justly so, given the fact that productions of *grands opéras* in many European cities and towns frequently lacked the resources to create a sense of spectacle.<sup>68</sup> Develle, then, became a figure through whom the press could express their pride at the quality of

---

<sup>65</sup> *The Daily Picayune* (30 April 1839).

<sup>66</sup> 'Théâtre d'Orléans: *Les Huguenots*', *L'Abeille* (8 June 1839).

<sup>67</sup> '(Communiqué) Théâtre d'Orléans: Bénéfice de Mr Develle', *L'Abeille* (28 May 1839). See also 'Feuilleton. Théâtre: *Les Huguenots*', *L'Abeille* (7 May 1839).

<sup>68</sup> See Cormac Newark, "'In Italy we don't have the means for illusion": Grand opéra in Nineteenth-Century Bologna', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19 (2007), 199-222.

New Orleans's production of *Les Huguenots* and, moreover, mark the success of the work as specifically French within the city.

While the critics focussed on the local dimensions of the production, they also used *Les Huguenots* as a way of transcending the local in their discussions, much as the anglophone critics had done in the reception of *Robert le diable*. They did this particularly through their detailed discussion of Meyerbeer's music, which in and of itself revealed a significant development in their critical practices: while Meyerbeer's score had been a source for discussions of fidelity in the reception of *Robert* in 1835, nowhere had the critics attempted to provide much by way of musical analysis. In contrast, the reviews of *Les Huguenots* dwelt at great length on the score and the role that Meyerbeer and his 'prodigious talent' had played in the work, placing his importance above that of Scribe and his libretto.<sup>69</sup> Certainly, Meyerbeer as composer was perceived to be fundamental to the opera's identity as a work, with his music contributing the vast majority of the opera's artistic worth.

Although the critics were keen to focus on the music, many of the reviewers expressed difficulty in judging the score satisfactorily, on account of both its size and complexity.<sup>70</sup> It was only after repeated hearings, they claimed, that the work could be fully understood, and the critic

---

<sup>69</sup> 'Talent prodigieux'; 'Le poème de Scribe n'est ni plus ni moins insignifiant que tous les poèmes de l'opéra. Il a été pour Meyerbeer un prétexte à musique et voilà tout.' See 'Théâtre: *Les Huguenots*, Opéra en cinq actes de Meyerbeer', *L'Abeille* (3 May 1839).

<sup>70</sup> See 'Feuilleton. Théâtre: *Les Huguenots*', *L'Abeille* (7 May 1839): 'Nous avouons humblement qu'il nous serait difficile encore de porter sur la partition gigantesque de Meyerbeer un jugement définitif ... Notre première analyse a été et devait être nécessairement incomplète.'



for *L'Abeille* noted with pleasure at the final performance of the season that the work was performed to 'a serious, attentive public ... brought together by an understanding of the creations of genius'.<sup>71</sup> Such work-oriented remarks do not, of course, reveal very much about the critics' personal experiences of *Les Huguenots*. What is most striking about them is less their surface description than their rhetorical construction, and specifically their close similarity to the opera's initial Parisian reception three years earlier. We only need to glance at Berlioz's comments that 'several attentive listenings are required in order to understand such a score completely' to begin to see where these similarities might lie.<sup>72</sup> While the new analytical bent of the reviews could well have been partly to do with the fact that the recently employed full-time music critic for *L'Abeille* had greater technical expertise than his predecessors, there is also a sense in which the critics in New Orleans deliberately and self-consciously emulated both the details and the attitudes of the Parisian reception in their own printed assessments of the work.<sup>73</sup> In so doing, they tapped into a vein of international critical rhetoric: a trend had developed in Paris (and was

---

<sup>71</sup> 'C'était pour nous un bonheur indicible de voir ce public sérieux, attentive ... s'associer par l'intelligence aux créations du génie.' 'Théâtre d'Orléans: *Les Huguenots*', *L'Abeille* (8 June 1839).

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Thomas Kelly, *First Nights at the Opera* (New Haven, CT, 2004), 193. For an exploration of Parisian responses to Meyerbeer's works, see Cormac Newark, 'Metaphors for Meyerbeer', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127 (2002), 23-43.

<sup>73</sup> Wilson reveals that similar comments featured in the New York reception of *Les Huguenots* following its premiere there in 1845 by the Théâtre d'Orléans troupe. See 'Meyerbeer and the New Orleans French Opera Company', 371-3.

taken up in other European capitals) for reviewers to describe operas that they felt would enter a newly developing repertoire of ‘great’ works in such terms of musical uncertainty, thus signalling them to be worthy of repeated listenings and canonical longevity.<sup>74</sup> By couching their responses to *Les Huguenots* in such international operatic discourse, then, the New Orleans critics asserted through their very language that New Orleans was at once capable of mounting productions of international repute and of understanding them within the sophisticated critical frameworks developing in Europe.<sup>75</sup>

### *Grand opera’s multiple cosmopolitanisms in New Orleans*

This notwithstanding, it is clear that reviewers felt somewhat uncertain as to quite what the ‘old country’ and its musical output meant for them, as articles published in *L’Abeille* illustrate particularly well. The first, a review of *Les Huguenots* from 18 May 1839, begins with the old quotation from Rousseau that ‘the French will never have music’.<sup>76</sup> This statement provoked an impassioned letter from a reader, which appeared in the paper on 27 May 1839. The review

---

<sup>74</sup> Newark explores this in ‘Metaphors for Meyerbeer’, 42.

<sup>75</sup> *Grand opéra* seems to have had a lasting impact on the path operatic criticism took in New Orleans: the years following its introduction to the city saw the emergence of a number of arts journals and dedicated (if often short-lived) music periodicals. A comprehensive account of the emergence of specialist periodicals and journals can be found in Tinker, *Bibliography of the French Newspapers and Periodicals of Louisiana*.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Les français n’auront jamais de musique.’ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, quoted in ‘Théâtre d’Orléans’: 3ème représentation des *Huguenots*, *L’Abeille* (18 May 1839).

argues that France will never have music, ‘that is to say an indigenous music, national, absolutely its own’, because French composers ‘from Lully to Meyerbeer, have always followed in the wake of the great composers of Italy and Germany’.<sup>77</sup> For the reviewer, even things accepted as French (and he gives Rameau’s works as an example here) are not as purely French as they might seem. This opinion is refuted strongly in the letter from the reader, however, who argues that ‘things that were written in France and on French libretti are French’: ‘the tree’, he points out, ‘might be exotic, but the fruit is indigenous’.<sup>78</sup> Lest such an argument not be satisfactory, he also turns to the writings of Madame de Staël, reminding his readers that if ‘genius has no gender’, nor does it have a ‘patrie’. For him, musical genius is essentially cosmopolitan, but such cosmopolitanism can bear national fruit.<sup>79</sup> The letter writer, then, saw the line between the national and the cosmopolitan as permeable: the national could become cosmopolitan and, importantly, the cosmopolitan could become national.

---

<sup>77</sup> ‘C’est-à-dire de musique indigène, nationale, absolument à elle’, ‘En effet, la France à toutes les époques, depuis Lully jusqu’à Meyerbeer, a toujours marché à la remorque des grands compositeurs de l’Italie ou de l’Allemagne.’ See ‘Théâtre d’Orléans’: 3ème représentation des *Huguenots*, *L’Abeille* (18 May 1839).

<sup>78</sup> ‘L’arbre est exotique, mais le fruit est indigne.’ See ‘Au M. le rédacteur de *l’Abeille*: De la musique en France’, *L’Abeille* (27 May 1839).

<sup>79</sup> ‘Madame de Staël dit quelque part: « Le génie n’a pas le sexe »; ajoutons aussi qu’il n’a pas de patrie.’ See ‘Au M. le rédacteur de *l’Abeille*: De la musique en France’, *L’Abeille* (27 May 1839).

Questions over Meyerbeer's nationality and what that meant for grand opera abounded in the initial Parisian reception of *Les Huguenots*, but the letter writer's conclusions open up the possibility of a particularly suggestive position for grand opera in New Orleans. The juxtaposition of details about the New Orleans production with claims it emulated the Parisian one can, in this light, be understood to have effected a negotiation of the national and the cosmopolitan, by way of the local. No matter whether we read grand opera as French because Meyerbeer created a work that was national by virtue of its French libretto, or whether we see it as such because it was cultivated and made famous in Paris in spite of its stylistically mixed heritage, the genre became a very useful embodiment of New Orleans's contemporary struggles. *Les Huguenots* could at once be cosmopolitan (meaning its prestige exceeded boundaries, both local and national) and specifically French (and, therefore, a francophone cultural product rather than an Anglo-American one). Both the French-language and English-language press in New Orleans, then, read *Les Huguenots* in relation to ideas of cosmopolitanism, but while for the English-language writers cosmopolitanism was an ambition of the cultural elites, for French-language critics, it was still firmly tied to ideas of nation and, in particular, of national supremacy.

In this light, grand opera became a tool of cultural power in New Orleans for the francophone community: even though the non-francophone residents admired it, they could only share in it through an emerging 'highbrow' sphere of culture, rather than through a deeper sense of heritage. It allowed the francophone community to engage with operatic and cultural debates on a transatlantic level, thus projecting their cultural prowess beyond the confines of the city, while still maintaining local 'ownership' over the material on account of their French descent. Grand opera's popularity and importance in New Orleans in this period of francophone-

anglophone tensions, therefore, rested upon its inseparable twin images as both French and cosmopolitan: the specific local context generated the desire to understand the genre as both cosmopolitan and nationally marked. *Robert le diable* and *Les Huguenots* left an indelible mark on the city's artistic development, drawing ever-closer ties between the theatre and the political and cultural issues of everyday life. Grand opera's reception in the city encouraged Pierre Davis and his theatre administration to seek faithfulness to Parisian productions; his personal connections with Meyerbeer, combined with his larger mission to bring the right singers, music and production details to New Orleans, resulted in both the solidification of the Théâtre d'Orléans's existing transatlantic links and the formation of new ones. Through grand opera, New Orleans confirmed its place in the ever-expanding operatic world of the nineteenth century.